

Adapting Toys and Play Materials

Although adaptation is most commonly associated with children with disabilities, toys can and should be adapted whenever any child – or group of children – needs extra assistance. The following ideas illustrate ways that early childhood toys and play materials can be adapted.

Make toys easier to grasp. You can make toys easier to grasp either by altering the toy or by substituting a different shaped toy that serves the same purpose.

- **Add a knob.** A round ball or large bead can be glued over the small peg handle on a puzzle or wind-up toy. If a puzzle piece has no handle, a spool, bead, or drawer pull works.
- **Attach a ring.** If a stuffed animal is large and does not have arms or legs that make it easy to grasp, you can attach a bangle bracelet or metal ring securely to the animal.

Make the toy more intriguing. Children may not know how to play with a toy or the toy may have, over time, lost its appeal. Minor adaptations can make toys more intriguing and encourage children to explore them more fully.

- **Group toys together.** Combining toys can suggest a play theme. Surrounding a stuffed animal with feeding equipment or arranging a puzzle about airplanes next to toy airplanes helps children make play connections and increases the chance that one of the toys will spark a child's imagination.
- **Add a surprise element.** Many familiar toys can be rejuvenated by adding a sensory experience or using the toy in an unpredictable way. Freezing pretend food before putting it in the housekeeping area, arranging puzzle pieces in a play scheme, and putting scent on a stuffed animal or baby lotion on a doll adds a surprise element to ordinary play.

Increase the interaction value. Adaptations can create new opportunities for children to interact.

- **Provide duplicates of the same toy.** It is even preferable to have more than one for each child. Picture 3 or 4 children in a sand box with six shovels, six buckets, and six sand sieves. Children are happy to offer each other a bucket or give up a shovel because there is always another one to play with.
- **Add props.** When it is impossible to provide duplicate toys, arrange toys with props. Having more than one 48" ball may not be practical, but arranging a ball with large plastic hoops, construction cones, and perhaps a smaller ball or two, increases the chances that a group of children could happily play a game together.



Add extra sensory input. Some children have disabilities that limit their ability to process information with one or more of their senses. Adaptations that add extra sensory input take advantage of all possible learning channels.

- **Add new texture.** Attach Velcro dots to blocks or a material with an unusual texture to a play activity, such as sponges to water play or sand to finger paint. Be aware that some children may have adverse reactions to certain textures.
- **Vary temperature.** Water play is always a surprise when the temperature changes from one day to the next. Please ensure the water temperature meets safety standards.
- **Increase visual contrast.** If a child has difficulty seeing the hole for a puzzle piece or cannot distinguish between two parts of a snap, use paint or a marker to make the hole where puzzle pieces fit darker, or paint one part of the snap a different color. When coloring or painting, it is helpful if the color of the paper is different from the color of the table.

Promote independent play. Many play experiences require children to be fairly independent; adaptations can give children information about what is expected.

- **Store toys where children can get them without help.** Store toys on low shelves, in open containers, and in the general area in which they are used. If toy animals or people are popular in the block area, consider storing them in the block area.
- **Give children information about how to play.** Starting a structure or arranging toys as if someone has been playing with them gives children information about how to begin, such as a doll sitting in a high chair with a bib and feeding equipment on the tray.
- **Secure toys near the child.** Wrist rattles, a ball hung from the ceiling, and toys attached to a stroller or wheelchair with plastic links are good examples. Toys should not be secured near a child any longer than she is interested in playing with them, however. Once a child becomes tired of a toy attached to the wrist, it is an annoyance, not a play thing!

Use open-ended materials.

- **Choose materials that can be used in multiple ways to support a variety of learning goals.** Open-ended activities make it more likely that you will be able to support skill growth for each child, regardless of his or her current abilities, and allow all children to participate in their own ways. For example, you might allow children to explore alphabet sponges in the art area. For some children, the goal of this activity might be letter recognition. For others, it might be exploration of mixing colors, letter sounds, or beginning to associate letters with words, such as their own names.
- **Tailor your interactions with each child to support the goal you hope the activity will serve for that child** (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2010). The questions you ask and feedback you give are crucial components of the learning process when using open-ended materials.

Sources:

Adapted from Child Care plus+ (2000). *Adapting Toys and Play Materials*.

National Center for Learning Disabilities (2010). *Change or Modify the Curriculum Activities*, RecognitionandResponse.org.